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ABSTRACT

The responses of 36 publishers and editors of city magazines--magazines such as "Chicago," "MPLS," and "Texas Monthly" that are published primarily for a local or regional market--provided data for an analysis of the positioning of these magazines in the media marketplace, factors leading to their success, their audience composition, and their problems. The editorial content of such magazines is usually in a jaunty, informal style, and typical articles are informational, investigational, or personality profiles, with a definitely local orientation. Survey respondents attributed the success of the magazines to the fact that they fill the gap between national and local media, aiming a particular editorial style at an audience that advertisers see as potentially good customers. Readers were most often characterized by the magazines as affluent, well-educated consumers, obviously an appealing group to advertisers who are willing to pay a premium to reach such markets. With all their success, however, city magazine publishers noted several problems they must surmount, including establishing a strong local identity; building circulation; finding good editorial sources/materials; the burgeoning costs of paper, printing, personnel, and distribution; and acquiring advertising support, especially from national advertisers. (A list of survey respondents is attached.) (RL)

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City Magazines Find a Niche in the Media Marketplace

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The proliferation of city magazines--magazines published primarily for a local or regional market--has been a major development in mass media over the past 15 years. Featuring content usually designed to stimulate, inform, and entertain the local area reader, city magazines compete with nationally distributed magazines and local newspapers for their audience. The medium is growing in importance because of its editorial content and because of its potential as an advertising medium.

Purpose and Method of Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the city magazine business as perceived by publishers and editors of such magazines. The primary data gathering technique was a three page questionnaire that was mailed to publishers and editors of city magazines as listed in Standard Rate and Data Service. SRDS lists most, but probably not all, such publications in the United States. The questionnaire and a self addressed return envelope were mailed in September, 1976. A followup was mailed three weeks later, to publishers who had not responded to the first mailing.

Response was excellent, and well above the level often considered adequate. Of 51 questionnaires mailed, 36 were completed and returned, for a response rate of 71 percent. The voluminous answers to some of the questions are indicative of thoughtful responses.[1]

The questionnaire focussed on the positioning of the magazines in the media marketplace, factors leading to success, audience composition and problems facing the industry.

The Growth of City Magazines

Early city magazines appeared primarily in the largest metropolitan areas, some having begun as offshoots of television program guides, dining guides or other publications. Chicago began as Chicago Guide, a free circulation publication in 1952, and New York at one time was a Sunday supplement to the Herald-Tribune.[2] Generally the period 1962-1974 brought the greatest growth in numbers in the field.

Today, most city magazines serve cities of 750,000 population or more. A few serve considerably smaller markets, and a few are more properly labelled "regional" than "city." One such publication is Texas Monthly, which serves the metropolitan areas of Texas.

Of the city magazines listed in SRDS, the largest circulation is that of Texas Monthly (158,007): smallest is that of Tucson (5,000). The publications are shown in Table I.

- Table I About Here -

Editorial Content

In its style, the city magazine is often characterized by jaunty, open informality. In the selection of subject matter, cover design and writing style, the city magazine diverges from the more formal approach often associated with some national magazines and reflects, as its publishers say, a modern approach to changing lifestyles in the city.

Types of articles range broadly, but the most popular appear to be of three types: (1) informational, (2) personality profiles and (3) investigational. Most have a definite local orientation; Herbert Lipson, publisher of Philadelphia said, "We wouldn't do a piece on Jerry Ford unless it turned out he was born in Philadelphia."[3]

TABLE I
CIRCULATION OF CITY MAGAZINES FOR WHICH
STANDARD RATE AND DATA SERVICE DATA ARE AVAILABLE

	CIRCULATION TOTAL
Atlanta*	27,613
Baltimore*	15,000
Boston	39,971
Broward Life (Ft. Lauderdale)	19,700
Buffalo Spree	18,000
Central Scene (Orlando)	6,500
Chicago	154,064
Chicago's Elite	26,000
Chicago Life	23,588
Cincinnati*	14,585
Cleveland	40,836
Coast (Los Angeles)	85,992
Dallas*	11,103
Delaware Today	8,073
Desert Silhouette's Tucson	5,000
D, the Magazine of Dallas	37,265
Exclusively Yours, Minnesota	35,000
Exclusively Yours, Wisconsin	31,753
Fairfield County (Connecticut)	26,500
Gold Coast Pictorial (Ft. Lauderdale)	15,166
Honolulu	26,740
Houston*	13,472
Houston Home and Garden	35,006
Hudson Valley	20,000
Long Island	30,000
Los Angeles	121,117
Louisville*	8,873
Metro (Newport News, Va.)	20,303
Miami	25,900
MPLS	23,921
Nashville!	11,148
New Mexico	71,222
New Orleans	24,545
New Worlds	61,247
Orange County Illustrated (California)	22,852
Orlando-Land	28,104
Palm Springs Life	61,938
Philadelphia	121,697
Phoenix	58,061
Pittsburgh	38,793
San Antonio*	9,500
San Diego	22,369
San Francisco	36,385
St. Louis	25,000
Sandlapper (South Carolina)	16,403
Texas Monthly	158,007
Washingtonian	59,150
Westchester	30,000

Source: SRDS, August 27, 1976
* Sponsored by Chamber of Commerce

A sampling of recent articles:

"Stop Before You Swallow," a warning against unsuspected side effects of prescription and nonprescription drugs. (Westchester, November, 1976)

A story about the future of Nashville's Music Row and the controversy surrounding the evolution of country music. (Nashville, October, 1976)

"To Lease or Not to Lease," an analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of leasing in Minneapolis. (MPLS. November, 1976)

A story about finding an honest automobile mechanic in Tucson. (Tucson, September, 1976)

"What Your House Tells About You" (Philadelphia, October, 1976)

"Best Dressed Men in Dallas" (D, September, 1976)

"Piercing the Stereo Mystique: How Much Is Enough?" (San Diego, November, 1976)

"Rating the French Restaurants" (San Diego, November, 1976)

"Your Guide to Pop Wine: Rating California's Vulgar Vintages." (Coast, October, 1976)

The Editor-Publisher View

Why have the publications caught on when the magazine industry generally has not been enjoying its best years? They reflect a pattern which magazine historian Theodore Peterson referred to as early as the 1950's. In his book Peterson noted the demise of the mass circulation general interest publication. The class publication was becoming the dominant magazine type, serving a highly segmented audience with specialized content.[4] The city magazine does just that.

The city magazine can offer excitement to its readers. Stephen M. Silverman, editor of Coast Magazine, says, "People want to feel they belong in an exciting environment; these city books often come off as making the

town seem 'chic'." Another publisher said, "People want to read about themselves and the place they live." Another said, "We care about the issues they care about." Significantly, William Kenzle, publisher of MPLS, pointed out, "Having a city that's interesting helps."

Some publishers of city magazines believe the success of their magazines is due largely to a void left by national and other local media. These weaknesses in other media are seen in editorial content, audience composition and ultimately the medium's usefulness to the advertiser.

Sammye Johnson, editor of San Antonio Magazine, attributes her magazine's success to the nature of its content:

> "Newspapers generally stress hard-core news and there is usually little space given to human interest stories or interesting, informative aricles of a broader nature concerned with economic development, business personalities, etc. City magazines typically address their articles to this sector."

James Killingsworth, publisher of Orange County Illustrated, said,

> "The successful ones fill a localized need that cannot be filled (even with 'zone' editions) by national magazines. We can zero in on a problem or situation that affects most if not all of the area we serve....Additionally, we can provide service that even the newspapers cannot: monthly calendar/dining guide, etc. We can communicate with meaningful directness in our editorial coverage."

Wick Allison, publisher of D, The Magazine of Dallas, wrote that national magazines are "out of touch" and "unable to provide specific service information." Taking a similar position, Walter A. Forbes, of Connecticut, wrote of service pieces as "an area newspapers and national magazines traditionally avoid."

Commenting on the local newspaper, one publisher pointed a finger at the "gutless" press that left a void that his publication could fill. Another publisher, Thomas G. Fitzmorris, of New Orleans, said city magazines "do what TV won't do and what newspapers do clumsily -- they discuss the city in a conversational way."

The Business Aspect

From an advertising standpoint one of the strongest differentiating characteristics of the city magazines is their audience composition. Not only are the magazines selective geographically; almost universally, they serve a demographically high quality market. The single most heavily used claim in the industry is that the reader of the city magazine is an upscale, well educated and well heeled consumer. He is characterized as being comfortable but not content; he is alert, concerned and, from the advertiser's standpoint, potentially a very good customer.

Chicago's Elite can probably make the most extravagant audience claims of all city magazines. Its publisher claims that its readers' median annual income is $86,000, 98 percent of its readers have a current passport; 40 percent own not one but two homes; 36 percent have given a son or daughter an automobile costing in excess of $8,000.[5]

Although most magazines cannot claim the audience demographics of Chicago's Elite, they can make some impressive claims. The income and education levels of city magazine audiences lean strongly toward the upper end of the scale, as shown in these selected data from magazines of varying circulations:

- Table II About Here -

The advertising implications of the audience composition are obvious. Leonard Quinn said, "Advertisers are willing to pay a premium to reach this generally affluent market."

J. Stanley Heuisler, publisher of Baltimore Magazine said, "As ad agency media people become increasingly selective in their strategy, city magazines become increasingly economical--if they're looking for the household earning $25,000 a year or more."

	Percent College Graduates	Percent Professional Managerial	Median Income	Percent Owning Home
Circulation 5,000-14,999:				
1. Houston	69%	78%	$46,300	83%
2. Louisville	89%	70%	$29,300	85%
Circulation 15,000-24,000:				
1. MPLS	43%	78%	$25,000(est)	74%
2. Sandlapper	84%	78%	$15,000(est.)	91%
Circulation 25,000-34,499				
1. Fairfield County	96%	98%	$40,000(est)	95%
2. Honolulu	54%	63%	$27,700	92%
Circulation 35,000-44,999:				
1. Cleveland	72%	76%	$22,778	68%
2. D, The Magazine of Dallas	64%	67%	$25,000(est)	79%
Circulation 45,000 +:				
1. Los Angeles	66%	63%	$29,060	65%
2. Philadelphia	30%	32%	$14,308	--

TABLE II: Audience Composition of Selected City Magazines. Source: Publishers' statements.

Problems Facing the City Magazine

As optimistic as industry spokesmen appear to be, the city magazine is not without its problems. Publishers noted several problems that exist in the city magazine business:

1. Establishing a strong local identity. If a city magazine is to succeed, it must have a raison d'etre. From a marketing standpoint, it must be positioned in such a way as to take advantage of whatever void is left by existing local and national media.

2. Building circulation. A perennial problem with most national magazines, this problem also faces city magazines. Because of the lack of economies of scale--low circulations and, therefore, high cost per thousands--the city magazines are at a disadvantage in competing with other media. E. L. Prizer, of Orlando-Land, said, "There are few reasons why a big-budget national advertiser should pay high cost per M when he can get much better rates with other media."

To build circulation, the publisher of San Antonio has mobilized the Boy Scouts of America in a "San Antonio! Calling" campaign to increase circulation to a minimum 20,000 readers. . .at Central Scene, a staff member contacts and works with organizations interested in selling subscriptions as a moneymaking project. Nashville! is experimenting with a telephone sales department as an alternative to direct mail solicitation.

3. Finding good editorial material. This problem is second only to the circulation problem. In magazines relying primarily on staff members and in those using freelancers, finding thoughtful, well written stories is a never ending search. George Crump of Metro, said, "Metro would like to run several investigative researched articles each year. Finding competent writers willing to commit themselves to this type of writing has been difficult."

Wick Allison, of D, observed that his market ". . .isn't mature enough yet to support quality free lance writers. Things are better, but we have a long way to go." Other publishers and editors shared that belief.

Two responses revealed widely diverging opinions of ways in which to reduce the problem of finding good editorial content. Joanne Myers, of Broward Life, is "enlisting the support of more college student journalists . . ." In contrast, Tom McNulty, of Chicago's Elite, complained, "I might say, there are a lot of people coming out of the journalism schools who think magazines and newspapers are not a business which has to be run like any other business. Too many people want to be the great American writer and not worry about who's making the money to keep everything going from day to day. Who needs them?"

4. Costs of all types. During the past three years, cost increases that have hit other businesses have also affected the publishing industry. Paper, printing, personnel and distribution costs have increased dramatically.

5. Acquiring advertiser support, in particular national advertisers. Although this has been a common problem among most city magazines, the publishers seem confident that as their magazines grow in quality and in readership, advertiser support will improve. Some of the publishers noted the excellent graphics of magazines and the fact that a retailer who wants to run a professional looking and impressive print advertisement has very little choice; the retailer can use the local newspaper and settle for a low level of quality of reproduction, or he can use a city edition of a national magazine and forego the believability that the publishers claim is inherent in a good city magazine. The third, and often the best, alternative open to the retailer is to use the city magazine.

The Future

The urban survival manual, as it is referred to by Time, has become a significant medium of communications.[6] It has found an important, albeit narrow, niche in the marketplace in large and medium sized metropolitan areas. Through careful writing and editing and clever positioning, it has grown in a sometimes uncertain industry.

However:

> "Even a city magazine that follows all of the rules is not guaranteed success, of course, particularly in difficult economic times. Production costs, and in particular the price of paper, have risen at a staggering rate in the past year, far above the general rate of inflation, and have wiped out the profit margin at some publications."[7]

Footnotes

[1]The author expresses his appreciation to the publishers and editors who responded so generously to the questionnaire:

Wick Allison, publisher	D, The Magazine of Dallas
Edward J. Brennan, president and publisher	Fairfield County Magazine
Gary Brown, publisher	Sacramento Valley Magazine
Marsha E. Carr, editor	Houston Magazine
George A. Crump, publisher	Metro
Libby Ferguson, managing editor	The St. Louisiana
Thomas G. Fitzmorris, editor	New Orleans Magazine
Walter A. Forbes, publisher	Connecticut Magazine
Nancy N. Glick, editor and publisher	The Central Scene
Lute Harmon, publisher	Cleveland
Charles F. Herd, publisher	Louisville
J. Stanley Heuisler, editor	Baltimore Magazine
Sammye Johnson, editor	San Antonio Magazine
William Kienzle, editor	MPLS
James C. Killingsworth, publisher and editor	Orange County Illustrated
Michael R. Levy, publisher	Texas Monthly
D. Herbert Lipson, publisher	Boston Magazine and Philadelphia Magazine
Tom McNulty, advertising director	Chicago's Elite
D. F. Delle Monache, publisher	Los Angeles Magazine
Joseph L. Mrantz, publisher	Honolulu Magazine
Joanne Myers, publisher	Broward Life
Vita R. Nelson, editor and publisher	Westchester Magazine
Dennis Nix, publisher	Tucson Magazine
E. L. Prizer, publisher	Orlando-Land
Leonard A. Quinn, publisher	Delaware Today

Bob W. Rowland, editor	Sandlapper
Ron Rozman, managing editor	Hudson Valley
Edwin F. Self, editor and publisher	San Diego Magazine
Norman Shavin, editor	Atlanta
Stephen M. Silverman, editor	Coast Magazine
Frank E. Smith, publisher	Cincinnati Magazine
Turney Stevens, Jr., publisher	Nashville!
Herb Stein, editor	Pittsburgh Magazine
Kathleen Turner, editor	Dayton U.S.A.'
Kenneth A. Welch, publisher	Phoenix Magazine

[2]"Urban Survival Manuals," Time, March 29, 1976, p. 64.

[3]"The Payoff in City Magazine," Dun's, November, 1974, p. 72.

[4]Peterson, Theodore, Magazines in the Twentieth Century. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1956.

[5]Chicago's Elite promotional brochure, 1976.

[6]"Urban Survival Manuals," Time, March 29, 1976, pp. 64-65.

[7]"The Payoff in City Magazines," Dun's, November. 1974, p. 72.

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